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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed girls' reactions to Disney's animated feature film "Pocahontas" in light of conclusions drawn from a previous critical textual analysis of the movie. The research addressed three questions: (1) how do Disney's claims to creation of positive prosocial representations of women and Native Americans in the movie "Pocahontas" hold up or collapse when viewed from a critical perspective which takes gender and class into account? (2) how do girls of different ethnic, socioeconomic, and geographic backgrounds relate to the romanticized story Disney has chosen to tell? and (3) how do the girls' responses to the movie compare between groups and with those of the researcher? Participants, ages 9 to 13, were middle-class Euro-American girls from a midwestern university town, urban working-class Native American girls from a large midwestern city, and girls of working-class families from a rural reservation in the southwest with one Native American parent and one Euro-American parent. Results from the focus groups with participants indicated that although there were points of agreement, in general, the girls' responses and attitudes toward the movie varied widely both between the groups and with respect to the researcher's conclusions about the movie. While the Euro-American girls produced a reading that could be labeled as "negotiated" in some respects, they appeared to accept the colonialist lessons learned about U.S. history and to view the movie as somewhat comical. For the urban Native American girls, "Pocahontas" was an important movie to which they related strongly. The Native American girls from the rural reservation were not as enthusiastic about the movie, perhaps because the culture of their daily lives strengthens their personal and cultural identities in such a way as to make media representations of Native Americans less significant for them. (This report includes background information concerning the story of the historical figure Pocahontas and the Disney movie based on her, followed by a textual analysis of the movie. Contains 19 references.) (EV)

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Disney's *Pocahontas*:

Conversations with Native American and Euro-American Girls

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This paper presents an analysis of girls' reactions to Disney's animated feature film *Pocahontas* in light of conclusions drawn from a previous critical textual analysis of the movie. Background information is presented concerning the story of the historical figure Pocahontas and the Disney movie based on her, followed by a textual analysis of the movie. Comments from three focus groups of girls ranging in age from nine to thirteen and from different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds are detailed. Conclusions are drawn from the interviews and the textual analysis. The groups of young people in this analysis include: a group of middle-class Euro-American girls from a midwestern university town, urban working-class Native-American girls from a large midwestern city, and girls of working-class families from a rural reservation in the Southwest with one Native American parent and one Euro-American parent.

Key words:

Disney movies; Feminism and popular culture; Girls; Reception analysis; Textual analysis; Children and media

The purpose of this paper is to analyze preadolescent girls' comments about Disney's animated feature film *Pocahontas* in light of conclusions drawn from a critical textual analysis of the movie (deleted for id purposes). Background information is presented concerning the story of the historical figure Pocahontas and the Disney movie based on her, followed by a textual analysis of the movie. Comments from three focus groups of girls ranging in age from nine to thirteen are included in this paper. The final section presents conclusions drawn from the interviews and the textual analysis. The ethnic and socioeconomic background of the young people in this analysis include: a group of middle-class Euro-American girls from a midwestern university town, urban working-class Native-American girls from a large midwestern city, and girls of working-class families from a rural reservation in the Southwest with one Native American parent and one Euro-American parent.

While the research on minority children and media has increased over the decades, there is scant literature when the focus turns specifically to American Indian and Alaska Native children (Geiogamah and Pavel 196). Because of the lack of studies on media and American Indian children (Morris; Geiogamah and Pavel), it is difficult to generalize about American Indian children's interactions with media. The studies that have been done point to a need for reform in representations of Native Americans in television and film to overcome the lack of nonstereotypical, positive representations. "Overall, the media's track record for socializing American Indian and Alaska Natives is lamentable" (Geiogamah and Pavel 198). Joann Sebastian Morris expresses concern that no matter how diligent American Indian parents may be in socializing their children to be proud of their culture and heritage, their children's healthy psychological development can be undermined by mass media's general lack of positive representations of Native Americans. Mistaken, inappropriate images of Native Americans in film and television have not only a direct negative impact on the young but also an indirect impact, created by the negative impressions the images make on the majority population, which can include peers and teachers.

The study discussed in this paper begins to fill a gap in research on Native American children's understanding of mass media texts. The research addresses three questions: (1) How do Disney's claims to creation of positive prosocial representations of women and Native Americans in the movie *Pocahontas* hold up or collapse when viewed from a critical

perspective which takes gender and class into account? (2) How do girls of different ethnic, socioeconomic, and geographic backgrounds relate to the romanticized story Disney has chosen to tell? And (3) how do the girls' responses to the movie compare between groups and with those of the researcher?

The Legend of Pocahontas

Disney's *Pocahontas* is a full-length animated feature film that can be classified as historical fiction. Released in the summer of 1995, the movie builds on the story of Pocahontas, reputedly the first Native American woman to marry an Englishman and to visit England. Pocahontas has been credited for a peaceful period between the Indians and the English during the early 1600s. While the historical details are difficult to document, the legend of Pocahontas is that as a young girl she saved the life of the English explorer John Smith by throwing herself between him and the executioner's weapon. Later, she married another Englishman, John Rolfe, and went to England with him. She was the first Native American to accept Christianity and English ways. She died at the age of twenty-one on a ship heading from England back to North America (Barbour; Lemay; Mossiker).

Disney's version of the Pocahontas story is a romantic fantasy in which Pocahontas and John Smith meet and fall in love in spite of the enmity between their peoples. The English, led by the greedy Governor Ratcliffe, reach the shores of North America, claiming the land as their own, determined to find gold and to fight off the Indians, whom they call "savages." The Indians watch the movements of the invaders and prepare to defend their land. While the high-spirited Pocahontas dreams of future adventures along an uncharted path, her father, the chief, Powhatan, tells her that Kokoum, a young heroic warrior, wants to marry her. Pocahontas privately rejects the idea of marrying Kokoum because he is too serious, and she consults Grandmother Willow (a 400-year-old tree spirit) about the future and the meaning of her dreams.

After her talk with Grandmother Willow, Pocahontas spots the English ship and begins to secretly trail John Smith as he explores the area. When she and John Smith meet, they are instantly romantically attracted to each other. Pocahontas is quick to understand John Smith's exploitive approach to the land and is upset by his characterization of her people as uncivilized. She educates him in a philosophy of life that is anathema to the profiteering motive Smith employs. Respect for the land, plants, and animals as living spirits is at the core

of the life view Pocahontas imparts to John Smith. While Pocahontas and Smith spend more time together, falling in love, the English are establishing a settlement and searching for gold, and tensions are rising between the English and the Indians. Both sides prepare for battle.

Caught in a bind between their illicit love for each other and their loyalty to own their peoples, and Smith meet to form a plan to talk with their respective leaders to head off the battle. Kokoum, worried about Pocahontas, who keeps running off from the village, goes out to look for her on a tip from her friend Nakoma. When Kokoum finds Pocahontas with the white man, Kokoum attacks Smith. Meanwhile, one of the Englishmen, Thomas, has been sent to look for Smith. When Thomas sees Kokoum go after John Smith, he shoots and kills Kokoum. Smith quickly sends Thomas away and takes the blame for killing Kokoum. Smith is captured and his execution is ordered. The following morning, with both sides up in arms, the execution is about to take place. Powhatan stands poised over Smith to kill him, but at the last possible moment, Pocahontas throws herself over Smith's body, proclaims her love for him, and makes an effective call for an end to the fighting. Hearing the wisdom in her words, Powhatan declares that he will not start the battle. At that moment, the greedy English governor, Ratcliffe, aims his gun and fires at Powhatan. Smith leaps before Powhatan, taking the bullet himself. The wound is serious and it is decided that the only hope for Smith's recovery requires him to return to England for treatment. Pocahontas decides that she has to stay with her people rather than go with John Smith to England. She feels a sense of duty at home. The story ends with the romantic, bittersweet parting of Pocahontas and John Smith.

A Textual Analysis of Disney's *Pocahontas*

The intertwining of race and gender is central to this critical textual analysis of the movie *Pocahontas*. The later Disney movies, and in particular *Pocahontas*, appear to be attempts to respond to the growing cultural diversity, calls for multiculturalism, and strong female role models in the United States. The character Pocahontas has been called a "Disney girl for the nineties" by her creator, Glen Keane. She was intended to be more muscular and beautiful than any of the Disney heroines ("Disney Discovers the Super Model" 40). The Native Americans in *Pocahontas* have "come out from behind the rocks" (Appleford 98) and are not merely the stereotypical stealthy enemy typical of Hollywood westerns (Stedman). Predictably, new issues of representation have arisen. Disney's *Pocahontas* may be prosocial, but it is far from problematic.

Disney's Pocahontas is a character who brings mixed messages to young viewers. The focus in this section will be on the construction of Pocahontas and her relationships, as well as her legend. How does Pocahontas compare with other Disney heroines, and how may we interpret her story in relation to that of Disney's other animated female stars? How does the "imperial imaginary" (Shohat 69) figure in the construction of the Native American Pocahontas and her romantic involvement with the Anglo explorer John Smith? It is important to note that *Pocahontas* is the only animated Disney movie based on a real person. Unfortunately, it is also the only Disney movie of its genre whose protagonist is Native American. A common stereotype of Native Americans is that of a people who *once* lived on this continent. The movie reinforces this common misconception (especially among young white children) of Native Americans in North America as extinct or even mythical peoples (Shaffer 202). Disney is riding the wave of recent North American films that "reflect a pronounced interest in Indians not as faceless savages who fire arrows at the good guys from unseen hiding places but as members of dynamic cultures" (Appleford 98). In addition, the movie reinforces the stereotype of Native American as noble savage, which springs from the ideological notion of "primitivism." Stuart Hall refers to this as the good side of the "native," "portrayed in a certain primitive nobility and simple dignity" (21) and points out that this is an image produced out of white ambivalence.

The first scene of the film in which Pocahontas appears establishes her as a young woman who possesses great beauty and grace. She has a Barbie doll body -- tall, with long, muscular legs and arms, huge breasts, a tiny waist, a long neck. Feminist arguments point out that holding up these unrealistic body images to young audiences is unhealthy. Not only can girls' self-esteem be endangered when they compare their own bodies to Hollywood's representations of the ultimate desirable woman, but judging from the epidemic of eating disorders in this country, it is clear that aspiring to unrealistic body shape and weight can cause serious illness, both psychological and physical (Gonzalez-Lavin and Smolak).

Reports indicate that Disney's Pocahontas was drawn from blended images of top fashion models, Iman and Kate Moss, and Princess Tigerlily from Disney's *Peter Pan* (Muldoon 21). She has long, flowing black hair, dark skin, high cheek bones, big black eyes, a full mouth, and an ethnic nose -- not the button nose of Snow White or Cinderella. She has more in common with Disney's other ethnic heroine -- Princess Jasmine of Aladdin. She has been called a character that just about any (heterosexual) male, animated or otherwise, would love.

Compared with other Disney heroines, such as Snow White, Cinderella, or Belle (from *Beauty and the Beast*), she is just as beautiful, only sexier, more sensual, and exotic.

Early in the movie the character and personality traits of Pocahontas are made clear. First of all, she is off by herself enjoying nature. She is independent, adventurous, courageous, and athletic -- no stumbling through the woods as a helpless female when she is pursued by some villain. Her dive off the waterfall is a moment that frames her as a thrill seeker, confident in her physical ability, and sensual in the pleasure she takes in nature. She is spontaneous, mischievous, playful, and defiant. In comparison with her more sedate friend and foil, Nakoma, she is clearly a high-energy, dominant female figure.

With respect to strong female role models, it is gratifying to see Disney departing from the female leads who are forever in need of rescue by the hero. Cinderella would have continued as a servant without her fairy godmother and her prince. Snow White would have been killed if not for the kindness of the woodsman, or forever banished without the dwarfs, and her prince. Sleeping Beauty would have slept forever without her prince. Even Jasmine, who shows some intelligence and independence, ultimately has to be rescued by Aladdin in order to have some choice as to her future mate.

Unlike other Disney heroines, Pocahontas does not live happily ever after with her Prince Charming. She pays dearly for all of those strong character traits. At the end of the movie John Smith is wounded and has to be taken back to England for medical treatment. Pocahontas decides that she is needed by her people and cannot go with him. The resolution of the relationship between the two is to always be together in spirit. This ending to the movie is not necessary for dramatic purposes. Since the real Pocahontas ended up marrying a white man and traveling to England, it is not necessary for historic accuracy. It can only be viewed on the one hand as a subtext that a strong woman cannot have it all, and on the other hand as Disney's inability to imagine sanctioning an interracial relationship in one of its animated films.

This is particularly intriguing when considering the barriers other animated characters have had to overcome on the way to romantic fulfillment. Snow White and Cinderella had help in battling the evil intentions of wicked and powerful stepmothers. Their beauty and goodness entitled them to supernatural assistance and to an enchanting future.

The issue of class has to be overcome in a number of the movies. Only magic is able to conquer the class barrier. Cinderella is a servant and has to be transformed by her fairy godmother's magic before she can win her prince. Princess Jasmine is under a decree to

marry only royalty, and it is the genie's power that helps Aladdin, the "diamond in the rough," to reveal his inner prince to become an acceptable match for her. Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* and Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* both have unproblematic liaisons with animal-like characters. Disney sanctions cross-species romantic involvements in these two films yet cannot entertain the possibility of the consummation of an interracial romance.

Like the other Disney heroines, Pocahontas has the animals and birds on her side. This is a feature that is part of virtually every animated Disney movie but the relationship of the barefoot and scantily-clad Pocahontas with animal and plant life goes beyond the others. She has a mystical, spiritual relationship with nature. The spirits of the earth, water, and sky are actively instructing her, helping her to see her future and to make important decisions. The scenes in which she consults Grandmother Willow (an anthropomorphised tree) exemplify her mystical relationship with nature. While it makes for enchanting visuals, this heightened spirituality also represents a stereotypical image of the Native American "in the person of the peaceful, mystical, spiritual guardian of the land who is in vogue in the 1990s" (Bird 2).

Most, if not all, of the Disney heroines are motherless. If there is a living mother, she is an evil stepmother. Pocahontas' grandmother is a tree spirit and her dead mother is immortalized and personified in the wind. Her father tells her that the people look to her mother (the wind) for leadership and that one day they will look to her. One reading of this is that Pocahontas, too, can hope to be as ephemeral as the wind.

Another way in which the postcolonial imaginary of Hollywood's movie makers comes into play is through Pocahontas' choice of love interests. Her rejection of the notion of marrying Kokoum, a heroic man among his people, is quite shallow. "He's so serious," she says. She figures that marrying him would be the end of her life. With that rejection of the familiar, she embraces a Western perspective on individual destiny. The notions of tradition and the common good are sacrificed for a sense of fulfillment through involvement with the unknown. It also conveys to young girls that a dangerous man is preferable to a solid, serious man for a mate. Pocahontas' immediate attraction to John Smith is really a bit questionable. Her friend Nakoma's reaction on first sight of him is more natural. She is shocked by such an unusual looking human. The movie does not provide a reasonable explanation for Pocahontas' attraction to this Nordic-looking character. He is constructed to fit Hollywood notions of white male hunk and that should be good enough to make him "universally" attractive.

On several levels, Pocahontas, "as a metaphor for her land, becomes available for Western penetration and knowledge" (Shohat 57). To the character John Smith, Pocahontas is clearly one more conquest. She has to disobey her father and betray her people to be with him. Her desire to be with him is responsible for Kokoum's death. To the producers of the film, the metaphor is taken one step further. The character is the product of the colonial gaze, not only in her physical features and attitudes but in the way she is rescued from a life of serious pursuit of the common good by an adventure with the irresistible John Smith. By the movie's end, Pocahontas realizes the importance of her people's need for her as a leader. This seems almost an afterthought for the movie makers, an excuse to keep her from the romantic fulfillment that has traditionally been the reward of the animated Disney sisterhood. So, as she must be satisfied with a tree for a grandmother and the wind for a mother, she has to learn to live with the ghost of a romance sacrificed for the future of her people.

Although the film makers make fun of the greed of the English explorers, depicting them as destroyers of the land, disrespectful of nature, crude and barbaric invaders with no regard for the native inhabitants of their new world, the conflicts are diffused by the end of the film. John Smith and Governor Ratcliffe return to England. Pocahontas has a broken heart but will rise to lead her people. John Smith is physically wounded but will heal. Kokoum, whose only fault was his seriousness, is dead. As a man of color in competition for the white man's female object of desire, he had to die. This ending neatly eliminates the need for the film makers to deal with the suffering of Native American people throughout history at the hands of the European settlers and their descendants.

It is important to emphasize the complexity of the subtexts in Disney's *Pocahontas*. The messages about strong women and Native Americans are mixed. While perpetuating some stereotypes, others are diffused. We have moved beyond earlier depictions of women as wilting heroines and Native Americans as the bad guys in *Pocahontas*, but it should be remembered that the characterizations in the movie are part of an ongoing process of change and as such still have their problematic elements with which we must grapple.

On the plus side, the movie *Pocahontas* begins to fill a void in film offerings for children with strong female, ethnic role models. The portrayal of indigenous people is more well-rounded than earlier representations in Hollywood children's films. Native people are shown within their communities and families rather than as the isolated enemy. For parents and teachers, the movie can be used as a springboard for discussion with children of issues

related to native peoples. It can also provide a starting point to delve into the history of this period. Finally, the underlying theme of respect for nature, or eco-consciousness, is important and timely.

While noting Disney's socially conscious intentions, they cannot be considered out of context. Obviously, the driving force behind the movie is economic. For example, the Pocahontas costume was the best-selling Halloween costume at Toys R Us in 1995 ("Ten Most Popular Halloween Costumes Sold") and Disney claimed its first printing of the movie tie-in children's book was the largest first printing in the United States (Reid). Pauline Turner Strong (1995) articulates the inherent contradictions well:

"'Po*ca*hontas' raises a number of difficult and timely issues . . . a tribute to its seriousness and ambition. Indeed, the film begs to be read as a plea for tolerant, respectful, and harmonious living in a world torn by ethnic strife and environmental degradation. That *Pocahontas* is rife with tensions and ironies is also a testimony to the limitations of serious cultural critique in an artistic environment devoted to the marketing of dreams. That our children are surrounded with Pocahontas-hype while being called to treat other cultures and the land with respect requires us to clarify for them the difference between consuming objectified difference and achieving respectful relationships across difference.

Another troubling aspect of the movie is its glorification of Native American religious beliefs. Today, that spirituality is increasingly exploited for commercial purposes. Laurie Anne Whitt (1995) makes the point that, intentional or not, this kind of cultural imperialism serves to "extend the political power, secure the social control, and further the economic profit of the dominant culture. The commodification of indigenous spirituality is a paradigmatic instance of cultural imperialism" (2).

In concluding the textual analysis of Disney's version of the Pocahontas legend, I want to draw attention to other possible interpretations of the Pocahontas story (beyond the Euro-American myth). While the Pocahontas story is viewed by Euro-Americans as a tale of cross-cultural understanding and tolerance (and the movie reinforces that view), it can also be seen as a tragedy for the woman Pocahontas, not to mention a turning point in the conquest of native peoples and their land. Pocahontas, as the first indigenous person to convert to Christianity, is a symbol of the acceptance of European cultural domination. She went from being an adventurous, free, high-spirited child to a tightly bound proper Christian woman, married to a man for whom she reportedly felt no great passion, far from her home in a foreign

land. Ultimately, she died of disease contracted in England. According to reports, grave robbers attempted unsuccessfully to sell her remains. In spite of attempts to locate them, Pocahontas' remains have never been found (Mossiker). The historical record says that after being kidnapped by the English, Pocahontas willingly and quickly accepted Christianity and English customs. Perhaps her willingness was really resignation. Her father wasn't coming up with the ransom -- what could she do? Although she was a favorite at court, it is possible that she was primarily a curiosity. There is no indication in the written history that her English hosts changed their ways or ideas because of their interactions with her. What is traditionally celebrated about Pocahontas are the ways in which she was expedient to European imperialism. While the Disney movie version of the Pocahontas story does not end in the usual romantic fulfillment viewers expect, it leaves the impression of a far gentler fate than the real-life Pocahontas and the descendants of her people suffered.

The Girls' Responses to *Pocahontas*

Three focus groups, with three to five participants in each, were conducted with girls ranging in age from nine to thirteen. In Group 1 there were five girls, from nine to thirteen years old. These girls can best be described as middle-class, Euro-American from a midsized midwestern university town. Group 2 included four girls, from ten to twelve years old. These were Native American girls of working class families from a large midwestern city. In Group 3 there were three girls, ages nine to eleven years old, from a rural reservation in the southwestern United States. Their families are working class and they are of mixed Native American and Euro-American descent but identify themselves as Native Americans. Differences in ages between the groups was not significant.

The girls were asked to recall how many times they had seen the movie *Pocahontas*. The urban Native American girls claimed to have seen the movie eight times (Group 1), whereas the average number of times the others saw it was 2.3 for the girls from the rural reservation (Group 3) and 1.4 for the Euro-American girls (Group 1). Significant differences were found between the urban Native American girls and the Euro-American girls ($t=3.00$; $p<0.05$). Since the number of girls in Group 3 was so small, Groups 1 and 3 were combined to test for differences with Group 2. The difference between the urban Native American girls and the other two groups combined was highly significant ($t=3.62$; $p<0.001$). Aimee Dorr (1982) points out that research provides evidence that children prefer programs and characters that

are ethnically similar to them. Table 1 below supports that idea and provides detailed information about the groups.

Table 1

	Group 1 n=5	Group 2 n=4	Group 3 n=3
Mean Age	11.4 [9,11,12,12,13]	10.8 [10,10.11.12]	10 [9,10,11]
Ethnicity	Euro-American	Native-American	Mixed EA/NA
SES	Middle class	Working class	Working class
Regionality	Suburban Midwest	Urban Midwest	Rural west
Average Number of Times Viewed Movie	1.4 [0,1,3,3,0]	8 [5,12,3,12]	2.3 [3,3,1]

The girls and the researcher screened the movie together immediately preceding the interviews. After viewing the movie the girls were asked to rate it on two scales. The first measure asked how much they liked the movie on a 1 to 5 scale (1="hated it"; 2="loved it"). The second measure asked them to rate the movie's quality on a 1 to 5 scale (1="thought it was a terrible movie" ; 5= "thought it was a great movie"). Table 2 illustrates their responses.

Table 2

Mean Ratings of Movie

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
Like Movie	3	4.25	4
Rate Movie	3.2	4.25	4.3

While the numbers in Table 2 are too small to talk about statistically significant differences, the urban Native-American girls (Group 2) liked the movie the most, followed by the Native American/Euro-American girls (Group 3). The Euro-American girls in Group 1 liked the movie the least, giving it an overall neutral rating. Since the two groups of girls with Native American backgrounds (Group 2 and 3) scored similarly, their scores were combined and

compared with the Euro-American girls (Group 1). Girls of Native American background liked the movie significantly more than Euro-American girls ($t=2.80$; $p.<.05$). As to the movie quality, the girls in Group 3 gave it the highest rating (4.24). The Euro-American girls in Group 1 rated the movie lower than the other groups on quality (3.2). When quality ratings of both groups of girls with Native American backgrounds were combined, they were significantly higher than those of the Euro-American girls ($t=2$; $p<0.05$).

The Interviews

This section summarizes each group's comments about the movie. Although the interviewer proceeded from a predetermined interview schedule, the format was open-ended to allow the researcher to probe certain issues or to give the participants the opportunity to expand on their ideas. The girls were asked to speak one at a time, but were told that it was okay for them to enter the conversation if something another girl said made them think of a point they wanted to make.

Questions about the movie focused initially on the girls' descriptions of the character Pocahontas with regard to her physical and personality traits. The issue of identification with the character was raised by asking the girls if they thought they were like the character in any way, would like to be like the character, and in what ways they might be different from her. The girls were asked to think about Pocahontas' judgements and choices, especially with regard to rejecting Kokoum and falling in love with John Smith. Finally, the girls were asked what they thought of the movie's representation of Native Americans and Englishmen in the movie. Results of the interviews with each group are summarized below.

Group 1 – Euro-American Suburban Girls: Pocahontas' hair was immediately mentioned as a salient characteristic: "Her hair always gets in the way." Another girl commented, somewhat cynically, "She speaks with wisdom beyond her years." In addition, the girls labeled her as "kind of preppy," "silly," and not as pretty as all the other "Disney girls" and too heroic in comparison with the other Disney heroines. Referring to Pocahontas' jump off a cliff above a waterfall, one of the girls called her a "suicidal maniac." When asked what younger female viewers might think of Pocahontas, the girls in this group thought younger girls would think she's pretty and would want to copy her and be like her when they grow up. They explained that younger girls would want to buy the product spin-offs from the movie in order to be like

Pocahontas. When asked why the younger girls would want to be like her, one girl jokingly said, "because she can jump off cliffs," while another submitted that it was because she was pretty, tall, has a boyfriend, and her father is a chief – in other words, she is the ideal of what every young girl aspires to be. There were also comments about her body being out of proportion. They mocked the way she spoke as being like a phonetics lesson.

John Smith, according to one of the girls, was not masculine. He had a "wussy attitude" that did not match up with the way the animators drew him. "He's too understanding for a guy." To this comment another girl replied that he was just trying to be nice to Pocahontas so she would like him. One girl commented that she had not wanted to see *Pocahontas* because the character seemed "too lighthearted" for an Indian. Her idea was that Indians are serious and that Pocahontas was not an authentic Indian because she was not serious enough. Another girl said she had not wanted to see the movie because Pocahontas "goes around doing good deeds," and that all the current popular movies and books for youth are about characters who are trying to do good. The theme is always the same and it makes for boring stories. She said, however, that it was okay to make these kinds of movies for smaller children. Yet another argued that Disney twisted the facts of the historical Pocahontas and that it is wrong for Disney to create a happy ending just for the sake of the movie. She was concerned that younger children would believe that the version offered in the Disney movie is the truth and that they would have misconceptions about history because of that, while another said that Disney created a happy ending so that the children watching it wouldn't be sad. Concerning the movie's ending, the girls agreed that it was mixed, both happy and sad. One noted that Pocahontas' father would be happy his daughter came back instead of "off with some guy."

When asked if there were any ways they would like to be like Pocahontas, one of the girls said she liked where Pocahontas lived, while some others replied that it is no longer like that. Another envied Pocahontas' freedom to be off by herself, while another remarked that Pocahontas did not have to go to school. They also liked her friend, Nakoma. One of the girls said that while it would be nice to be one of those kinds of people who everyone likes, a heroine and popular, on the down side it would be too glamorous and in that way not appealing. Another expanded on that thought, saying, "It's too fake. It's like being the decorative frosting on a cake. It looks pretty . . . but, it's not real." While they admired her bravery and even admitted to aspiring to being a little more brave, they concurred that

Pocahontas was too brave for her own good.

The girls in this group, while overall very cynical in their response to the movie, said that they had favorite Disney movies when they were younger and that they had acquired some of the spin-off products. One said she especially liked the music to the movies. Several remembered having had the Disney paper dolls, and another remembered pretending to be Beauty from *Beauty and the Beast*.

One said that Disney is trying to become more "ethnic" in its movies, while another said they are trying to become more geographically diverse and modern.

The girls were asked how they were different from Pocahontas. One girl said that she is "civilized," and would not consider throwing herself between a raised club and someone else in order to save them. Another girl referred to the mystical side of Pocahontas, noting that Pocahontas' dream had a meaning but that as far as she could tell her own dreams have no meaning. Another girl said she didn't have the bravery of Pocahontas, while another girl said it was stupidity rather than bravery.

When the girls were asked what they thought about Pocahontas' deciding not to marry Kokoum and then falling in love with John Smith, one response was that she was the type of character who wouldn't have wanted anyone who was "thrown at her." Another expanded on this by saying that Pocahontas did not want what anyone else wanted her to have, she just wanted to be different. Yet another added that Pocahontas was a typical teenage girl in that she did not want what her father wanted for her. One girl called Pocahontas' rejection of Kokoum "hypocritical," since both he and John Smith were the "hero type," but others argued that Kokoum would have tried to tell her what to do and squelch her free-spirited nature and rule over her and hold her back. On top of that, while Pocahontas was for peace, Kokoum was a warrior, and that would have created problems between them. One of the girls said she didn't understand why Pocahontas was upset that Kokoum had been shot, since she had rejected him. She interpreted Pocahontas' shock at seeing Kokoum killed as a sudden love for an unattainable person. "She wants what she can't have."

The girls were asked to comment on the movie's representations of Native Americans and the English. Concerning its depiction of Native Americans, one girl called it stereotypical, referring to the chanting of the medicine man. She said today they have houses and water and that they don't live like that any more. In general, the girls rejected Disney's representation of Native Americans as stereotypical. One girl pointed out that there were

similarities in the way the two groups were portrayed. Both the Indians and the English were obsessed by the same kind of worries. Yet she said that in a way Disney had turned the stereotypes around, making the English out to be savages, while the Indians were the wise ones. Another girl pointed out that the English were portrayed as very greedy.

The tone of this group's comments was often cynical, and eventually the girls began to talk about how at their age they enjoy making fun of movies for younger children. They talked about the fun of watching these movies with others their own age and laughing about certain parts. One girl said she thought the film makers intentionally add parts for teenagers to joke about in order to widen the audience. These girls seemed to enjoy second-guessing the film makers as well as critiquing and lampooning the movie.

Group 2 – Native American Urban Girls: The initial response to the character Pocahontas from this group was one of liking and approval. "She's pretty." "She's nice." In contrast with the comments of the girls in the first group, which began in a cynical tone, these girls took the character more seriously. "She's pretty smart . . . she knows which path to take." There was an appreciation of her efforts to stop the fighting and curb the "path of hatred." There was also approval of the playful, adventurous, childlike aspects of her personality, as well as her freedom, her risk-taking behavior, and her desire to dream.

The question of identification with the character produced mixed responses. While two of the girls did not think that they had anything in common with the character, another identified with the childlike nature of Pocahontas, saying "people say that I act like a little kid . . . I want to keep having fun." However, this girl labeled herself as shy, saying she would not speak out the way Pocahontas did, and later said she admired that in the character. She also mentioned a similarity between herself and Pocahontas in that both of them seem to have contact with protective spirits that help out when there is trouble. She said she would like to be around animals the way Pocahontas was. Another girl also identified with the desire to have fun and have exciting things happen. The same girl said that she, herself, stands up for her own and other people's rights. In that respect, she identified with Pocahontas when Pocahontas stood up for John Smith.

When asked in what ways they might want to be like Pocahontas, in addition too wanting to have adventures, one of the girls remarked that Pocahontas lived in a beautiful place. She also admired Pocahontas' decision to stay with her father at the end of the movie

rather than going off to England with John Smith. The girls raised the issue of Pocahontas' service to her people as a positive attribute. They also talked about wanting to be like Pocahontas physically. "She's very beautiful. She's sleek," noted one of the girls, while another said, "I would like to be pretty like her, she's very beautiful." The girls liked Pocahontas' wisdom, heroic nature, and adventurous spirit as well as her strength and power in standing up for herself and her people. "I would like to stand up for myself more than I do," one of the girls said.

When asked how they think they are different from Pocahontas, one of the girls replied, "I don't look like her. I don't live like her. I live in a bad place, where there are gangs." Another girl mentioned that it was not polluted where Pocahontas lived but that she lives on a noisy main street. Still another talked about how in contrast to where she lives, in an apartment in a neighborhood where it is dirty outside and there are gangs, Pocahontas lives in a place free of these problems where the water is clean. She also said, "I am not really wise like her. Sometimes I don't choose the right path. And she's really pretty . . . and I am not that pretty."

Other differences in culture were noted. One of the girls said that she has a big family, but that in contrast with Pocahontas' family, all of whom live in one place, her family members live in different places. She also pointed out that while today young people go to school, Pocahontas did not go to a formal school, and that there are differences in the ways they have celebrations. Another girl mentioned that while Pocahontas was able to harvest her food, her own family goes to the store to get food.

On the topic of Pocahontas' decision to reject Kokoum, the girls agreed that it was a good decision. They agreed that Kokoum's seriousness was a problem. If she married him, it would prevent her from doing all the things she had dreamed of doing. They thought he would be an authoritarian and jealous husband. "He would boss her around." "She wouldn't be able to jump off waterfalls." "She would have to stay home." "She would be stuck cooking for him . . . he wouldn't go out to have some fun with her . . . If she had married Kokoum the fighting wouldn't have stopped. He would have convinced Powhatan to keep fighting." One girl said that if two people of different backgrounds, like Pocahontas and John Smith, love each other, their love might contribute to an improvement in the relationship between their people. In addition, Pocahontas was old enough to decide for herself rather than her father telling her what to do. They agreed that it is right to marry the person you love rather than to end up in

an arranged marriage. They thought John Smith would allow Pocahontas to continue to have fun and exciting adventures. One said that, as Grandmother Willow concluded, John Smith had a good soul.

When asked how the movie represents Native Americans, the girls' comments were generally very positive. According to them the film shows that "we're not savages. We're the same as anybody else. We have feelings, and blood, and everything that other people have. We don't like to start wars. We stop wars." "They want to be peaceful, to live and have fun." "Even though the culture's different, it doesn't make them savages." "They're powerful. Everybody's the same. The skin color doesn't matter." "Indians aren't really savages. They can take care of themselves." One girl expressed the feeling that if they had been left alone, the Indians could have continued living the way they were and it would have been better. On the negative side, one girl said the movie shows that Native Americans like to start to fights, since Kokoum started the fight with John Smith.

Responses concerning to the movie's representations of the Englishmen were generally negative. According to one girl, the English had to learn that the Indians, in spite of their outward differences, are not savages. Another comment was that the English were blind to any way of valuing nature other than their own. The English were convinced that they were the greatest and the smartest people. The girls agreed that the movie showed the English to be greedy and prejudiced against the Indians. It showed them as wanting to kill the Indians. One girl pointed out that the English called the Indians "Injuns" and said that the Englishmen seemed like savages themselves. However, they said that the representation was not totally negative, since by the end of the movie the Englishmen understood the Indians better, realizing that the Indians did not want to fight.

Group 3 -- Mixed Native-American, Euro-American Rural Girls: The first thing the girls in this group had to say about Pocahontas was that she's an Indian. In addition, they said she is different from other people. Her skin is different. Her behavior is different from that of other people in that she doesn't follow the rules. They said it is clear that she cares about people. She stopped the fighting, and that shows that she cares about people. It was also mentioned that she is pretty.

When asked about how they might identify with Pocahontas, they all said just that she's an Indian and so are they. They admired the fact that she is pretty and likes to be different.

"She's really pretty and nice and she cares about other people." They would like to be different the way she is and to be helpful to other people. They all admired her independence, and they felt that they, too, were independent.

When asked how they are different from Pocahontas, they mentioned that they wear different kinds of clothes and that their tribal ways are different, in particular their language. They talked about differences in appearance, saying that Pocahontas has darker skin and longer hair. With regard to the character's personality, one girl said Pocahontas is probably kinder than she is, and another said she did not help others as much. When asked about her physical bravery, the girls said that although they had recently jumped off waterfalls they did not think they were always as brave as Pocahontas. The girls in this group were unsure about the correctness of Pocahontas' decision not to marry Kokoum and did not offer any thoughts or comments on that situation.

When asked about how the movie represented the Native Americans, one of the girls said it was good because it showed how they really lived, while another said it was a mixed portrayal. According to one, the fact that the Indians in the movie did not start the fight contributes to a positive representation, but the fact that they wanted to kill John Smith shows them in a negative light. One of the girls commented that the song "Savages" (in which the two groups dehumanize each other with this label), especially bothered her.

They thought that the English people were represented in a general, but not totally, negative light. The way they wanted to fight and to keep John Smith from being with Pocahontas were the negative aspects of the portrayal, along with how they talked about killing and called the Indians savages. Also, the Englishmen killed two Indians in the movie and they wanted to build houses without asking permission and they claimed the land as soon as they reached the shores. The only good thing the English did was to stop fighting. According to these girls, John Smith was nice because he liked Pocahontas.

When asked about the movie's end, they said they thought it was good that Pocahontas stayed home rather than leave for England with John Smith, because if she had gone it would have been a betrayal of her people.

The tone of this session was low key. The girls seemed a bit shy and reticent about engaging in the interview process. Interestingly, after the tape recorder was turned off and the interview officially ended, the girls warmed up, became more animated, and asked me to ask them more questions about movies, while they waited to be picked up. They considered

Pocahontas too juvenile for them, a movie that is more interesting for their younger siblings and cousins.

Analysis of the Interviews

Any analysis of the girls' responses to the movie should make it clear that what they said tells as much about them and their life situations as about the movie. While there were a number of common issues raised by the groups, each had its own particular ambience. The Euro-American girls were somewhat cynical and sarcastic. It seemed at times as if they were engaged in gossip about a girl whom they all knew. Their reading of the film contained some elements of an oppositional reading, in which they criticized Disney for its version of the Pocahontas story, and enjoyed making jokes about various aspects of the movie and its characters.

Group 2, the urban Native American girls, had a very different tone. A much more serious consideration was given to the movie. The girls seemed to take the character and her story to heart. There was a feeling of authentic connectedness to the movie. Judging from the number of times these girls had previously seen the movie, it can be assumed that it had significance for them. Their talk about the movie could be characterized as in line with a dominant reading. Not having many positive media images of Native Americans with whom they want to identify might lead them to embrace the movie and the character wholeheartedly and uncritically.

The girls in Group 3, of mixed background from a rural reservation, responded seriously to the movie, but they gave the distinct impression that the movie was not very important to them or had any meaning for them beyond that of any other Disney movie. Perhaps the reality of their lives on the reservation, in which their own tribal identity and culture is strong, limits the significance of mediated representations of Native Americans for them.

All three groups mentioned Pocahontas' physical beauty, but only the girls in the urban Native American group talked about wanting to be pretty like her. The girls in the other groups did not in any way indicate dissatisfaction with their own physical appearances in comparison with Pocahontas. In fact, the comment was made by one of the Euro-American girls that Pocahontas was not as pretty as the other Disney heroines. In considering why it might be that in only one of the groups of girls the desire to be pretty like Pocahontas was expressed, one has to wonder about these girls' notions of what constitutes beauty in society. Clearly, for

them Pocahontas represents an ideal of Native American beauty against which they measure themselves as inadequate. This supports the notion raised earlier in this paper which states that representations of women with unrealistic body images can be unhealthy for the self-esteem of girls and young women.

Each of the groups addressed Pocahontas' inner qualities -- her adventurous nature, courage, caring for others, and wisdom -- but to varying extent and with different conclusions. The Euro-American girls related to Pocahontas as an exaggerated figure, a caricature. They questioned Disney's motives and made judgments about the film makers' intentions, interrogating not just the characterizations but the fictionalized version of the Pocahontas story.

The urban Native American group gave wholesale approval to the character Pocahontas, her personality, her choices, her judgements. The girls in this group seemed to desire to be more like Pocahontas. The girls from the reservation also approved of Pocahontas and her ways, but the desire to be like her was not an issue. These girls admired her independence, but they thought they were independent themselves. The Euro-American girls thought Pocahontas' dives off of waterfalls indicated that she was a "suicidal maniac" and the urban Native American girls approved of her risk-taking behavior, while the rural girls from the reservation related to it as something they had also done. Perhaps because of their experience of daily living on the reservation, the rural Native American girls were not engaged in the fantasy of *Pocahontas*, either as a Native American ideal or as a representation of a lost past.

All of the groups related to the natural environmental setting of the movie. One of the Euro-American girls expressed a kind of longing to live in such a beautiful place, while another added that it does not look like that anymore. However, it was in the group of urban Native American girls that a kind of nostalgia for a perfect past was inspired by the movie. Not only did some of the girls say they would like to live in the place Pocahontas lived, one of the girls wondered aloud if she might not be living like that now if the Europeans had not come and conquered and changed the ways of life and the land. The girls from the rural reservation thought the movie represented well the way Indians really live and that this was a positive aspect of the movie, even though their own clothes and customs are different.

In contrast with the textual analysis that critiques the movie for presenting Native Americans as peoples of the past, the girls of Native American descent did not appear to be

concerned with that aspect of the film. In fact, stereotypes were mentioned specifically only by the Euro-American group. It may have been uncomfortable for the girls of Native American background to address the issue of stereotypes in the presence of a non-Native American researcher. On the other hand, both groups with Native American backgrounds showed a concern for the use of the word "savages." (The word "savage" falls under the definition of an ethnic slur and is therefore a taboo term.) Girls in both groups pointed out that the movie showed that Indians want peace, not war, and that they are like other people -- the color of the skin does not matter. They thought that in general the Indians were represented positively and were not troubled by the ending of the movie, in which Pocahontas and John Smith are separated, even though they approved of the relationship. None of them mentioned the fact that only Pocahontas, among all the Disney heroines, did not live happily ever after with the hero. This was an issue that was salient for the researcher.

Interestingly, the Euro-American girls thought that Kokoum would have made as good a mate for Pocahontas as John Smith, but the urban Native American girls foresaw problems if Kokoum and Pocahontas would have married. They agreed with the idea presented in the movie that Kokoum was too serious and that Pocahontas' fun would have ended if she were to marry him. They extrapolated from the movie that Kokoum would have been an authoritarian husband. They also thought it was important to marry for love and that ethnic background should not be a roadblock to a relationship. The girls from the rural reservation had no comment on Pocahontas' decision to reject Kokoum. It might be a non-issue for them, being of mixed Euro-American and Native American background themselves. None of the girls mentioned any hesitation concerning Pocahontas' readiness to go with a strange and unknown man.

One of the urban Native American girls said that she related to Pocahontas' spirituality because she also felt that she had helping spirits. While this issue was not specifically raised by any of the other girls, one of the Euro-American girls was a bit wistful about the fact that Pocahontas' dream had a meaning, in contrast to her experiences of her own dreams. The only other mention of spirituality was that one of the Euro-American girls found the depiction of the medicine man to be stereotypical.

One final methodological note should be made in concluding this analysis. The interviewer's identity as a middle-class, Euro-American may have influenced the moods of the interview sessions. For the Euro-American girls, the similarity between the interviewer and

themselves may have led them to "cut loose," whereas the girls of Native American background were seeing a person dissimilar to them ethnically, coming from a very different social background, and it may have contributed to a feeling of shyness or hesitation. Beyond this, there may simply be different cultural values placed on verbosity that could account for the loquacious, interactive nature of the session with the Euro-American girls, and to the quieter sessions with the Native American girls. Whatever the explanation, it would be desirable to have interviewers who are ethnically similar to the interviewees in future research.

Conclusion

This paper set out to critically analyze the animated Disney movie *Pocahontas* with respect to gender and race and to examine interviews with preadolescent girls of different ethnic, socioeconomic, and geographical backgrounds in light of that analysis. It is evident from the interviews that although there were points of agreement, in general, the girls' responses and attitudes toward the movie varied widely both between the groups and with respect to the researcher's conclusions about the movie.

While the Euro-American girls produced a reading that could be labeled as "negotiated" in some respects, they appeared to accept the colonialist lessons learned about U.S. history. They assumed that historically speaking, the good guys were the Europeans and that they had won, and that the outcome was positive. Their ability to joke about the movie may be related to the fact that *Pocahontas* is just one more animated Disney movie for them, a genre that was important to them as little girls but is now considered a vehicle for budding adolescent sarcasm and cynicism.

For the urban Native American girls, *Pocahontas* is clearly an important movie. This can be concluded judging alone by the number of times they saw the movie. Given the lack of positive media representations of Native Americans, it is not difficult to understand why they would relate so strongly to the movie and the character Pocahontas. Some of the movie's themes, such as respect for nature and the value of family and community, are themes that are in line with their traditional cultural values. While their reactions to the movie were far afield from those of the researcher, their reactions support the need for and importance of positive, nonstereotypical representations of Native Americans in contemporary popular culture.

While the Native-American girls from the rural reservation were not as enthusiastic

about *Pocahontas* or as engaged in the discussion, as the girls in the urban group, they also produced a dominant reading of the movie. As pointed out earlier, the movie did not seem to be of great importance to them. This might be the result of the culture of their daily lives strengthening their personal and cultural identities in such a way as to make media representations of Native Americans less significant for them.

None of the girls questioned the lack of a romantic ending or Disney's choice not to let the characters live happily ever after in an interracial romance. None of the girls questioned Disney's Eurocentric view of the Pocahontas story or of the history of the period, although among the Euro-American girls there was dissatisfaction concerning Disney's misrepresentation of historical "truth," with regard to Pocahontas' age and her relationship with John Smith.

The girls' readings of the film produced three very different conversations that can be related in part to their ethnic, class, and geographical backgrounds. To the researcher's initial claim that *Pocahontas* is a mixed bag, "prosocial yet problematic," the girls' conversations add a number of interesting insights. Taken as a whole their responses attest to the complexity of the representational issues in the movie. In part, they affirm what Disney was trying to accomplish ideologically. For producers of popular culture, this analysis of *Pocahontas* should serve as an encouragement to make special efforts to produce programming with strong, contemporary, nonstereotypical representations of women and Native Americans.

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